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Soviets fire new booster into space

By Martin Sieff
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A mysterious Soviet satellite launch that at first was suspected of being a military, or "star wars," project turned out to be a test of Moscow's new SL-16 medium booster, which could lead to a major increase in Soviet launching capability, U.S. space experts said yesterday.

Cosmos 1767, launched on July 30 from the Soviet cosmodrome at Tyuratam, Central Asia, splashed down last Saturday in the South Indian Ocean. It had several strong similarities to an unpublicized Soviet launch of June 21, 1985, which led to Western fears that it was a "star wars" test.

Said one intelligence expert: "There was a lot of concern over 1767, since no scientific function could be ascribed to it."

However, a leading U.S. space analyst said: "The characteristics of the launch support the theory that it was a testing of the new Soviet SL-16 booster. It has the same fingerprint as previous tests."

Cosmos 1767 "never maneuvered," he said. "It never did anything. Its orbit decayed slower than anything we've ever seen, indicating it was massively solid."

Another analyst added: "NORAD [North American Air Defense] got radar returns on the launch. They said it wasn't the Soviet space plane, as it had no wings. And it couldn't have been a chemical laser test, because the density would have decreased as the chemicals were used up, and that didn't happen here."

"The payload was quite heavy, in the region of 33,000 pounds [16½ tons], and the SL-16 booster is believed to have a lift capacity in this region."

A Pentagon source who declined to be identified said the satellite was the new SL-16, which U.S. experts say has been tested four times previously. It will more than double the payload in manned Soviet space flights, currently limited to 7 tons.

"It's a liquid oxygen-liquid hydrogen powered booster, a fuel combination which the Soviets have never successfully used before in their space program," one expert explained.

"Until now, they haven't seen a need to do it. But the U.S. Saturn V and main space shuttle boosters are liquid oxygen-liquid hydrogen powered, as are the French Ariane and the upper stage of the Chinese Long March 3 boosters. The Japanese just tested their liquid oxygen-liquid hydrogen booster last week."

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